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ABSTRACT

Several problems and issues are typical of the beginning years of a principalship. A study of first- and second-year principals in a midwestern state classified these problems and issues into three broad areas: role clarification, limitations on technical expertise, and difficulties with socialization to the profession and to a particular school system. Implications concerning the principals' inservice and continuing professional development needs are as follows: (1) principals need a better type of practicum to let them actually experience the world of administration before they take their first job; (2) specialized inservice administrator training needs to focus on law, school finance, teacher evaluation procedures, computer applications, and other issues of daily, practical concern; (3) new principals need more collegial support, perhaps in a sort of "buddy system"; and (4) principals need patient mentors available to talk about job concerns. References are appended. (IW)

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COMING ON BOARD: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BEGINNING PRINCIPALSHIP

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BEGINNING PRINCIPALSHIP

If the predictions of numerous state education agencies, administrative professional associations, and university placement offices are correct, the next few years should offer some excellent career opportunities for men and women who will be seeking positions as elementary and secondary school principals across the United States. Due to a variety of factors, including school board-sponsored incentives for early retirements, decreases in the number of people initially entering the field of professional education, and increases in the student enrollments of some school districts, there will likely be a need for a substantial number of new principals in the foreseeable future (Daresh, 1986). Not all new principalships will be filled by people without previous administrative experience, of course. However, there will probably be a great influx of newcomers to the field of school administration. Thus, there will be some tremendous opportunities for school systems to find some new people who might begin the process of suggesting new ideas and new solutions to many old problems. Unfortunately, there is a strong likelihood that many inexperienced principals will fail when provided with the first challenges of educational leadership. The focus of the study described in this paper was to review some of the major problems and issues that appear to be characteristic of the beginning years of the principalship. In addition, there will be a

series of recommendations proposed for helping school district policy makers and others interested in the professional development and preparation of school principals to consider these characteristics and plan for strengthening the potential leadership contributions of incoming administrators.

The school principalship, in general, has recently been experiencing a re-discovery as the focus of considerable attention by numerous scholars (Barth, 1985). Ever since the school effectiveness movement proclaimed that the principal is a key component of productive schools (Edmonds, 1979; Brookover & Lezotte, 1980), there has been widespread general acceptance of the view that the principalship is indeed worthy of much attention and support by theorists, researchers, and practitioners alike. In recent years, then, there has been increasing interest in describing the principalship in ways that help to understand the unique features of that role. Numerous studies have served to establish the fact that, while the behavior of principals might in fact be the single most important determinant of school effectiveness (Austin, 1979; Lipham, 1981), there are also important and unavoidable characteristics of the daily life of teh building administrator which serve to prevent, or at least inhibit considerably, the ability of an individual to "make a difference" in his or her building (Peterson, 1984). As Mintzberg suggested in his study of the work of managers (1978), there is a need to view the school principal's job as one of mobility, fragmentation, and urgency. The problem with such an analysis of the daily likfe of school building administrators is that it paints a picture of an environment where it is unlikely that someone can bring about school improvement in a stable, wholistic, and calm fashion.

Objectives

The specific objectives of this paper are to, first, describe a recent study of teh characteristics of first and second year principals in a mid-western state. Second, some of the major findings of this study will be summarized. Finally, based on these findings, implications concerning the inservice and continuing professional development needs that are experienced by beginning school principals are presented as a way to guide future researchers as well as educational policy makers.

Design of the Study

The basic methodology that was utilized to collect the data for this study consisted of intensive, in-depth interviews conducted of twelve first and second year principals. General backgorund characteristics of each of the respondents are provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1 HERE

With two exceptions, the interviews which lasted from one to two and one-half hours in length were conducted on-site at the principals' schools. Responses were sought to the following basic research questions that were used in each interview:

1. What are the surprises that you have experienced on the job so far?
2. What features of the principal's job have inhibited you from attaining the goals that you set for yourself when you first started?

PRINCIPAL	SEX	AGE	LEVEL OF SCHOOL	POSITION PREVIOUS YEAR
1	F	27	Elementary	Teacher
2	F	30	Elementary	Teacher
3	F	34	Elementary	Assistant Principal
4	M	36	High School	Supervisor
5	M	32	High School	Assistant Principal
6	M	30	Middle/Junior High	Principal[1]
7	F	33	Middle/Junior High	Teacher
8	F	28	Elementary	Supervisor
9	M	41	High School	Graduate student[2]
10	M	29	Middle/Junior High	Teacher
11	F	31	Elementary	Principal[3]
12	M	33	High School	Assistant Principal

TABLE 1. Selected background characteristics of selected beginning principals.

[1]Named principal mid-way through the previous year. Had been an assistant principal.

[2]Prior to entering a full-time graduate program, had been an assistant principal.

[3]Was a classroom teacher two years ago.

The answers that were provided to these questions as well as numerous additional probing questions served as the foundation for the study findings which follow.

Findings

Due to the limited size of the sample, and the fact that participating principals were not included in the study as the result of a random selection process, caution must be exercised concerning the findings presented here, in terms of their generalizability. Despite this limitation, however, the interviews of the principals are able to serve as an important indication of pressing concerns faced by beginning school administrators. In general terms, principals reported problems and issues in three broad areas. These were role clarification, limitations on technical expertise, and difficulties experienced with socialization to the profession and to a particular school system. Each of these concerns is best understood by an examination of principals' specific responses.

Role Clarification

A common statement and observation made by the beginning administrators was related to their perception that they really did not know what the principalship was going to be like before they got into it. This seemed to be common to all respondents, even those who had served as assistant principals in the past. Regarding the principalship, all had studied it, watched it, read about it, talked about it, and as the result of the internships or planned field experiences required for certification in their state, even practiced it to some degree. They all admitted that they did not truly understand it, however. One of the specific deficiencies felt in this area was illustrated

through the comments of one first year high school principal:

> I knew that I was supposed to be in charge, but I really was unprepared to deal with having real authority and leadership responsibility. I just wasn't comfortable with it at first.

What many of the principals seemed to be saying was that, while it was satisfying and pleasant to be called "the boss," few could imagine all of the responsibilities that were associated with that title until actually living in that role. Thus, a real and persistent problem faced by beginning school administrators involved the ability to comprehend clearly the precise nature of the new position.

Technical Expertise

Beginning principals also reported an uneasiness and feeling that they needed additional technical expertise to assist them in doing their jobs more effectively. When this issue was analyzed more thoroughly, it was observed that people were actually reporting two distinct kinds of technical expertise: Procedural or mechanical expertise, and expertise in the area of interpersonal skills. In the case of the first type, examples included rather normal "how to" concerns such as how to read computer printouts provided by the central office, how to address various legal issues, how to budget (both material resources and personal time), or how to implement, coordinate, or report system-specific mandates. An example of this last type of issue was provided by one elementary school principal who remarked:

> I really felt at a loss when I first got into the job--particularly with learning how to cope with all the forms they [the central office] wanted me to fill out at the start of the school year. I didn't know eher to start! Thank goodness that the old advice about relying on a good secretary was true in my case.

The comments of this one principal were not unique. In fact, if any one single area of beginning administrator concern could be classified as most powerful, this area of a lack of technical expertise related to procedures was it.

The list of problems faced by principals in the area of interpersonal skill development included such things as better conflict management skills, improved school-community relations skills, and decreased tensions with the teaching staff. As one beginning administrator who had just moved from the role of teacher to the principalship in the same school observed:

> I was really most surprised with the amount of conflict I saw everyday as part of my job--with kids, with parents, with the central office, and with the teachers. I couldn't seem to please everybody all the time, and I felt I should... It was really disappointing with the teachers--the people I was a part of only last year. Now they had little to do with me, except for permission to do things, or for gripes.

Some of the principals also spoke of another type of need related to interpersonal skill development. That was a feeling that they believed that the people with whom they worked--teachers, staff, central office administrators, and community members--often had no concern for their own interpersonal needs. For example, several principals admitted to feeling a general anxiety related to their job, attributable mostly to a sense of a lack of self-confidence. They never knew if they were really doing a good job, and no one in their schools or districts appeared inclined to provide much feedback or direction to help them understand how they were doing. This lack of feedback was an issue principals felt from every level of the organization--superiors, peers, and subordinates. The generalization can be made that beginning principals felt they lacked not only an information base concerning

effective ways of handling situations with the people in their schools, but also strategies of gaining interpersonal support from others.

Socialization to the Profession and the System

The third major category of concerns facing beginning principals can be described as issues related to how people learn how to act in their new positions--socialization to the profession. Specific examples of needs and concerns in this category were somewhat less concrete than were the issues described in the two previous areas. Here, people seemed to be talking about their needs to learn more specifically "how to read" the signs of the systems in which they worked: How were principals (as generic roles) "supposed to" act? This was not limited solely to issues related to expected professional behavior--such as how to dress, whether or not to attend school board meetings, and which community organizations one was expected to join--although these concerns were present among beginning administrators. Even more of an issue were the implicit expectations felt in most districts that principals, regardless of the amount of experience, should somehow understand the proper routes to be taken to survive and to solve problems.

For example, one principal indicated that he felt foolish after following the procedures stated in the district policy manual regarding requests for new equipment for his building. Stated policy required formal application to an assistant superintendent for administrative services; the "real" way things happened was to deal directly with the director of buildings and grounds and not bother the assistant superintendent who was too busy with other matters not listed in the policy manual. The new principal discovered

this discrepancy between stated policy and real procedure only after talking to another, more experienced principal who noted that the request for equipment owuld gather dust and never be acted upon if "proper and normal" channels were followed.

Beginning principals, particularly if they came from a district other than the one which subsequently employed them, felt vulnerable to the effects of a political and social system that they did not fully comprehend. This lack of "knowing the ropes" in a particular school or district was no small concern to first and second year administrators who desperately wanted to feel they could be repeated in the system.

The list of specific concerns, needs, interests, feelings of deficiency, and other wants of beginning principals is a long one indeed. This attempt to organize individual items into three major categories is not meant to trivialize the importance of any specific issue. Nevertheless, even in this simplified listing of problems encountered by beginning administrators, it is clear that much time, energy, and talent is spent trying to respond to particular concerns. The assumption might then be made that, if strategies could be developed to minimize the impact of these issues, principals might be able to be more attentive to duties that would increase the effectiveness of their schools.

Implications

The above observations concerning the general categories of concerns faced by first and second year principals offer some opportunities for changing existing policy and practice. These changes, in turn, can enable administrators

in the earliest stages of their careers to enjoy more satisfying and successful experiences.

First, existing approaches to experiential learning (i.e., practica, field experiences, and internships) utilized in the preservice preparation of principals are generally not sufficient in their ability to enable people to experience the world of administration before they take their first job. Currently, experiential learning for principals usually consists of situations where aspiring administrators, in most cases full-time teachers unable to get district approval for release time, find some quasi-administrative tasks that can be performed during time not assigned during the school day to teaching or other duties. As a result, people are being prepared to be educational leaders by spending five to ten hours per week supervising bus loadings, calling the homes of truant students, filling out forms, or devising new student handbooks. Instead, people need a different type of practicum, an opportunity to get a glimpse of the principal's worl and also to live in that world and be held accountable for decisions made. Such a learning experience would be a more useful way to help men and women understand what they are getting into for a career.

Second, specialized inservice training for beginning administrators needs to be developed and targeted for the needs of this particular group of school leaders. New administrators indicated that they needed more information about law, school finance, teacher evaluation procedures, computer applications in education, and other similar issues related to daily, practical concerns. Workshops, seminars, and training institutes of short duration can be designed to address beginning administrators' perceptions that they need more technical expertise related to interpersonal skill development. Thus, training

programs that introduce alternative ways of dealing with stress, managing conflict, improving conference skills, or enhancing home-school-community relations may be effective and have a significant impact on the ability of principals to work with people in and around their schools.

A third implication for the improvement of practice derived from this study of beginning principals is that ways need to be found to ensure that, wherever possible, new administrators are not left totally alone to solve their problems in isolation from their colleagues. We already know that a serious problem for classroom teachers is that they spend a high percentage of their time isolated from their co-workers (Lieberman & Miller, 1984). This lack of collegial support on the job is a negative characteristic of how things tend to happen in schools. While this is clearly a problem for classroom teachers, it is also a major shortcoming of the principalship. To address this issue, principals might be encouraged to work together in pairs in a sort of "buddy system" that would enable them to have at least one person in the school system who could provide consistent feedback concerning job performance.

Firally, beginning principals need patient mentors who are available to talk about concerns that arise on the job. One of the principals interviewed during this study reported frustration in trying to understand the norms in her school district regarding principals' attendance at school board meetings. A senior principal explained to her the types of agenda items where the superintendent normally expected principals to attend as a supporting cast, and which items did not call for the same sort of symbolic support through attendance. The new principal then became quite skillful

in reading the signs of the district. Because people in any organization are often judged according to their ability to interpret correctly what are often very subtle signs, it is quite likely that the intervention of a trusted colleague as an aide in assisting the beginning principal in understanding the superintendent's expectations was a way of ensuring some greater success. This example, then, is typical of the hundreds of situations that arise in the life of a new school principal which might have a great impact on a person's career.

Summary

In this paper, limitations on the effectiveness and leadership potential of first and second year principals were described according to the ways in which beginning administrators explained restrictions on their ability to do the job they wanted to do when they were first hired. Local school districts, universities, state education agencies, and administrators' professional associations were all suggested as organizations with a legitimate stake in the business of trying to assure successful performance by beginning administrators.

The only way to maximize the talents of people in any organization is to assume that talents truly exist in those people in the first place, and that everything that can be done to help beginning administrators will be done. Through such an assumption, it will be possible to assist leaders in overcoming the first and highest hurdles in the path toward greater effectiveness.

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